



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Bahamas

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 13,939 square miles, and its population is approximately 340,000.

There are a wide variety of religious beliefs. More than 90 percent of the population professes a religion, and anecdotal evidence suggests that most attend services regularly. The country is ethnically diverse and includes a Haitian minority of legal and illegal immigrants estimated at 40,000 to 60,000 persons, and a white/European minority that is nearly as large. The country's religious profile reflects this diversity. Protestant Christian denominations--including Baptists (35 percent), Anglicans (15 percent), Presbyterians, Methodists, evangelicals, and Seventh-day Adventists--are in the majority, but there are also significant Roman Catholic (14 percent) and Greek Orthodox populations. Smaller Jewish, Baha'i, and Muslim communities also are active. A small number of Bahamians and Haitians, particularly those living in the Family Islands, practice Obeah, a Bahamian version of voodoo. Practicing Obeah is illegal under the Penal Code. A small but stable number of citizens identify themselves as Rastafarians, while some members of the country's small resident Guyanese and Indian populations practice Hinduism and other South Asian religions. Although many unaffiliated Protestant congregations are almost exclusively black, most mainstream churches are integrated racially.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. The Government at all levels strives to protect this right in full and does not tolerate its abuse, either by governmental or private actors.

Although there is often reference to the country's strong Christian heritage in political and public discourse, there is no established or official state religion. Clergy are trained freely in the country, and the Constitution specifically forbids infringement of a person's freedom to change religion.

Good Friday, Easter Monday, and Whit Monday are national holidays, although there are no negative consequences for those who choose not to observe them.

Churches and other religious congregations do not face any special registration requirements; however, they must incorporate legally to purchase land. There are no legal provisions to encourage or discourage the formation of religious communities, which are required to pay the same tariffs and stamp taxes as for profit companies once they legally incorporate.

Religion is recognized as an academic subject at government schools, and it is included in mandatory standardized achievement and certificate tests for all students. The country's Christian heritage has a heavy influence on religion classes in government-supported schools, which focus on the study of Christian philosophy, biblical texts, and, to a lesser extent, comparative and non-

Christian religions. The Constitution allows students, or their guardians in the case of minors, to decline to participate in religious education and observance in schools, and this right--although rarely exercised--is respected in practice.

The Government meets regularly with religious leaders, both publicly and privately, to discuss social, political, and economic issues.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Government policy and practice contributed to the generally free practice of religion.

The Government permits foreign clergy and missionaries to enter the country and to proselytize and practice their religion without restriction.

Over time, Haitian migrants have brought elements of voodoo to the country from Haiti. The practice of Obeah is illegal under Chapter 84, Section 232 of the Penal Code. Those caught practicing Obeah, or attempting to intimidate, steal, inflict disease, or restore a person to health under the guise of Obeah, may receive a sentence of 3 months' imprisonment.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Society can be less tolerant of religions perceived as foreign, particularly Obeah or other forms of voodoo. Some Bahamians publicly describe the poverty and political unrest in Haiti as signs of God's disapproval of the practice of voodoo.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discussed religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

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